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ABSTRACT

One approach to teaching business letter writing skills in German to second-year students with limited German language skills is described. The letter-writing material was integrated into a business German course sequence. Students were introduced to the general purpose of business correspondence and to several different letter types. The first skill to be mastered was the proper order and construction of letter elements; variants for some elements were also introduced at the same time. Students were assigned problems to solve, including locating errors, selecting correct versions of an element, and composing elements on their own. The second step was to expand on the types and content of business letters. In this phase, students categorized letters by form or specific elements. Typical phrases and vocabulary were also introduced. As students became adept at recognizing and using set phrases, finer points of letters, such as specific products or unique conditions, were addressed. At this step, students began to formulate appropriate letters or to reformulate letters of which parts were missing. Vocabulary was practiced in a variety of different letters. Instructions for a series of class tasks are included. (MSE)

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TEACHING BUSINESS LETTER SKILLS IN A BUSINESS GERMAN COURSE ON THE SECOND-YEAR LEVEL

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TEACHING BUSINESS LETTER SKILLS IN A BUSINESS GERMAN COURSE ON THE SECOND-YEAR LEVEL

In a recent article John M. Grandin addresses the problem of using business letters to teach Business German.[1] Despite voicing initial misgivings over using such a complicated form of communication, he states that we owe it to the students to teach letter writing skills, if we want them to function in a German business context. The students themselves are also interested in mastering these skills, since the ability to understand and produce business correspondence would be of interest to any potential employer. Therefore the expectations brought to courses or course sections in business letter writing are generally high. The students hope to learn how to write letters, the professors feel the pressure to devote considerable time to the task. If they expect to prepare their students for the Diplom Wirtschaftsdeutsch, they will probably want to use letter writing as the primary vehicle for preparing the students for the written portion of the exam.[2]

No doubt given enough time and energy these goals are accomplishable. Many professors, however, who are faced with the task know that, given the time and the talent available, they cannot possibly bring their students to the point where they can function as perfect combinations of businessmen and bilingual secretaries. For example, when I was preparing a three course sequence (three hours per week for three ten-week quarters) in Business German and decided to integrate some "letter writing skills," I knew that I would have to limit mine and the students' expectations. For several

reasons we have to offer our Business German courses on the second year level, and the majority of the students enters them with only 90 hours of preparation in German behind them.[3] Since I know from experience how few guidelines and how little material is available to ease the task of preparing an essentially "elementary" section in business letters, I would like to share my experiences with my colleagues.

The text we decided to use for the complete three course sequence was Merrifield's Deutsche Wirtschaftssprache für Amerikaner.[4] I do not intend to discuss the manner in which that book was used, but to concentrate on the integration of the business letters into the sequence. The students did not actually have to order a specific textbook for this purpose, but several were recommended as we went along.[5] They were told that I would bring materials to class as they needed them and they were given an outline of the skills they were expected to master: first of all the ability to understand and produce the proper external form of business letters, secondly the ability to recognize and to interpret different types of letters and their characteristics. The actual production of letters was going to be approached too, but the students were told that we would start slowly and perhaps only work on parts of letters and that it was up to them how far we went.

These "business letter skills" were taught in two-to-three hour chunks, which were inserted into the regular class

materials at certain intervals, generally at the rate of two to three chunks per quarter. The business letter material constituted a continuous sequence. The actual pedagogical sequence for producing business letters which the Goethe Institute advocates was followed in its main features,* but we concentrated on overpracticing the first-taught elements of learning to master the form and to understand the general content with variants. Eventually we did indeed go beyond this to a limited degree, but my experience has convinced me that the originally set goals are realistic and to some degree constitute the limit that can be reached with beginners in Business German.

In an initial lecture the students were introduced to the general purpose of business correspondence and to several different types of letters, such as Anfrage, Angebot, Bestellung, Lieferung, Reklamation and Zahlung. The circumstances under which such letters might appear were outlined briefly, since the majority of our students is in science or engineering and their knowledge of business practices is limited.

The first skill they had to master was to put each letter into an outwardly acceptable form. They had to know the proper order and construction of such elements as Briefkopf, Bezugszeichen, Adresse, Datum, etc. In some instances, a large variety of variants could be introduced. The students had to know, for example, whether to address "Herr Professor Dr. Hugo Anders" as "Sehr geehrter Herr Dr.,"

or "Sehr geehrter Herr Professor Anders," or "Lieber Dr. Hugo Anders," or any number of versions thereof. Almost any business letter session from that point on started with some small problem which would test them in these external matters. The problems could be handed out in written form and collected for grading, or they could be presented orally and informally. Several types were used. For example:

a. The "spot the error" problem. The students were given a fully set up letter, in which some element was not in its proper place, or had been left out.

b. The students were given a series of Anreden (or other elements) containing correct and incorrect versions. They had to circle the correct ones.

c. Eventually the students were asked to compose the external form elements on their own. This started with limited assignments, such as: "Sie sind bei IBM in Atlanta und schreiben an Herrn Professor Schrader an der Universität Hamburg. Wie muß die Adresse aussehen? Wie reden Sie den Professor an? Wo müssen Adresse und Anrede stehen?" Later on this could be extended to more complex ones, for example: "Ein Brief geht von Herrn Johann Schmid in der Versandabteilung der Firma Hoechst in Frankfurt/Main an den Tierarzt Roland Maier in Stuttgart. Setzen Sie die äußere Form des Briefes auf. Benutzen Sie, was Sie haben. Erfinden Sie den Rest. Die Form muß vollständig sein."

d. After several types of business letters had been introduced, the following task could be assigned:

TRANSPARENCY 1

The next step was to introduce the students to the various types of business letters and their content. They were given sample letters and short synopses of the likely content of any one type of letter, such as:

TRANSPARENCY 2

After several types of letters had been introduced, the students were again presented with short problems or tests at the beginning of business letter writing periods. For example:

a. They might get a letter and put it into the appropriate "category." They would have to underline the phrases that gave them their clues.

b. They would be given a key element from a certain type of letter and would have to identify the type of letter it could occur in.

The students were encouraged to note correspondences between the inner and outer form of letters. An Anfrage, for example, has no listing under Ihr Zeichen, since it has not been preceded by previous correspondence.

The students were also introduced to the typical phrases and vocabulary they might encounter in different types of letters. The number of possible variations here is of course infinite, but in some areas we are dealing with limited units. The students had to recognize, for example, that the

first point in an Anfragebrief might involve references to Messe, Broschüre, Prospekt or Anzeige as possible initial contact points for two businesses.

It was encouraging to find that most of the students were very good at identifying familiar phrases and given clues. Some attempt, however, had to be made to keep the complexities in certain areas to a minimum. When, for example, in the context of Bestellung, the Zahlungs-bedingungen and Lieferbedingungen were introduced, the students were initially given short lists of possible terms with - admittedly oversimplified - definitions.* For example:

"frei" bedeutet, daß der Kunde nicht zahlen muß

"30 Tage Ziel" bedeutet, daß der Kunde 30 Tage Zeit zum Bezahlen hat

This truncated terminology was nevertheless confusing to our second year students, probably because they knew too little about business. Eventually I simply asked them to recognize terms in general ways and to learn to place them into one of the two categories, such as:

Bestimmen Sie: Zahlungsbedingung oder Lieferbedingung?

"frei Grenze," "cif," "60 Tage Ziel," "Kasse gegen Dokumente," "an Lager..."

In general, however, the difficulty of the test problems could be increased to a greater degree, especially where the subject matter itself was simpler. For example, as far as closing phrases for letters, or phrases used to express the

hope that the customer would place an order were concerned the students actively learned to handle many different constructions. To help them acquire a certain repertoire, we would once again start by underlining significant elements in phrases like "Nach Rücksprache mit Ihrem Vertreter bestelle ich...," or "Wir bestellen auf Grund Ihrer Anzeige...'" or "Wir möchten eine erneute Bestellung aufgeben..." Later on the students were given the same phrases with parts thereof blanked out and they would have to fill in the missing information. As an additional task a letter might be given in cut up or scrambled form, and the students had to reassemble it with all of the external and internal elements in proper order. While it might be argued that the scanning techniques the students primarily employ in completing these tasks do not lead to a full and appropriate understanding of business correspondence, they are a helpful pedagogical tool. First of all they are a valid starting point and perhaps even a necessary precursor of more complete reading techniques, since they mirror the way students read in their own language, secondly they give them confidence and the feeling that they are "understanding," perhaps even before that is fully the case.[10]

As the course progressed, the students got adept enough at recognizing and using set phrases, so I could ask them to pay more attention to the finer points of business letters, such as the specific product mentioned, or certain unique conditions in a given supplier - recipient relationship.

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Since we had at other points of the course dealt with some aspects of trade or marketing, I presented them with some simple situations similar to those we had encountered under those circumstances and asked them to formulate appropriate letters. Once again we began with partial production tasks, for example: TRANSPARENCY 3

Eventually the student progressed to slightly more independent tasks, such as the following: TRANSPARENCY 4

No attempt was made to make the tasks even more complex, such as providing only a vague outline of a given situation and asking them to visualize for themselves how a letter would have to be phrased under those circumstances and what elements it would have to contain. The reason for that was not only that the students did not have the language skills necessary at that point, but also that their lack of knowledge of trade practices, for example, would make such a task frustrating.

As one of the last assignments the students were given the excerpt of materials from UNSERE POST (Informationsmappe, Stand 06/80) shown on p. 11. The letter was blanked out and the students had to reconstruct it on the basis of the information given in the other three "communications." TRANSPARENCY 5

The students respomded to the approach with continued interest. My initial fear that the on-again, off-again approach would confuse them proved unfounded. They were quite happy that they did not have to master each skill at

once and that they could discuss different topics in between the business letter segments. Furthermore, I often brought little problems or tasks dealing with business letter to the regular classes, especially if the material covered in Merrifield lent itself to presentation via letter.

While we were discussing Industrie und Handel, for example, the students could already set up the external form of a letter to any Handelskammer. When banking was on the agenda, they could formulate the opening phrases of a simple letter to a bank, perhaps requesting information on setting up a savings account. When we were dealing with Marketing, a letter presenting a fictional new product was written to an appropriate party. While we were discussing Gesellschafts-formen, the students filled in the elements of a letter to a lawyer, asking for information about certain aspects of corporative organisation. In this manner we could reinforce both letter writing skills and at the same time practice the vocabulary introduced in the Merrifield chapters in slightly different ways.

The general consensus was that this last aspect of the letter writing sequence should be expanded. It allows for a good deal of creativity on the part of the student and the teacher and keeps the interest in the topic alive.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] John M. Grandin, "Teaching German Business Correspondence: A Computer-Assisted Approach," Unterrichts-praxis, 19, 1 (1986), pp. 49-54.

[2] Both the Duisberg Society and the Goethe Institute advocate strictly the kind of course leading to the Diplom. (I have attended the summer sessions of both as well as all of the workshops in Business German given at the Goethe Institute Atlanta over the course of several years.) It should be mentioned that the Diplom may also require the production of Telex or Memo, but that the Goethe workshops pay little formal attention to either and concentrate essentially on pointing out the differences between these forms of communication and the business letter.

[3] It should be pointed out, however, that the achievement levels of our students are relatively high. After their 90 hours of German many ranked 2 and 2+ on the Foreign Service language proficiency ranking scale, both in understanding and grammatical proficiency.

[4] Doris F. Merrifield, Deutsche Wirtschaftssprache für Amerikaner (New York: Wiley, 1985).

[5] See Grandin's article for an excellent discussion of useful texts.

[6] Based on an October 1985 workshop.

[7] The letter was distributed during the October 1985 workshop. As far as it is now possible to tell, both the

letter and the assignment are from I. Martelly and G. Nicolas, La correspondence commerciale en Allemand (Berlin, Paris, 1985). Both have been abbreviated for this paper.

[8] This material is based primarily on Rudolf Sachs, Deutsche Handelskorrespondenz (München: Hueber, 1985) and on handouts from the Goethe Institute.

[9] Sachs, p. 22.

[10] This is a point frequently stressed by the pedagogical staff of the Goethe Institute. See also Inge Laveau, Sach- und Fachtexte im Unterricht, Methodisch-didaktische Vorschläge für den Lehrer (München: Goethe Institut, 1985).

[11] Based on Sachs, p. 36.

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TRANSPARENCY 1

"Beantworten Sie den gegebenen Brief. Schreiben Sie nur Dinge aus, für die Sie Information haben."?

Helmut Wagner und Sohn
Leipziger Str. 250
3600 Kassel

WAGNER
TEXTILWARENFABRIK

Schrader und Lehmann
Einkaufsabteilung
Max-Richter-Str. 95
8970 Immenstadt

Ihr Zeichen, Ihre Nachricht vom		Unser Zeichen	Tel: Kassel
fr-bl	02.03...	L-hf	03.06..

Betreff:

Angebot über Strickjacken

Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren!

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

Hochachtungsvoll,

Helmut Wagner und Sohn
gez. Peter Funke

TEACHING BUSINESS LETTER SKILLS IN A BUSINESS GERMAN COURSE ON THE SECOND-YEAR LEVEL

TRANSPARENCY 2

a. Inhalt einer Anfrage:

Woher kenne ich die Firma

Warum frage ich an

Was möchte ich wissen

Angabe einer Referenz

b. Inhalt eines Angebotes:

Grund für das Angebot

Preisliste

Hinweis auf Produkteigenschaften

Hoffnung auf Bestellung

TEACHING BUSINESS LETTER SKILLS IN A BUSINESS GERMAN COURSE ON THE SECOND-YEAR LEVEL

TRANSPARENCY 3

Schreiben Sie einen "Anfragebrief." Benutzen Sie die richtige Form. Füllen Sie die Lücken in dem Brief unten mit passenden Worten und Ausdrücken. Der Brief geht von Herrn Peter Müller, einem Einzelhändler, an Herrn Georg Bender bei der Firma Heinemann und Co. in Düsseldorf, Rosenstr. 309. Wählen Sie selber das Produkt, von dem Herr Müller spricht. Er schreibt:

Vor kurzem habe ich _____ von Ihr_____ _____ erfahren.

Ich nehme an, daß ich bald selbst _____ in meinem Geschäft aufnehmen werde, und bin an Ihrer Auswahl interessiert. Bitte senden Sie mir _____, damit ich mich ausführlicher über Ihr Produkt informieren kann.

Schreiben Sie einen guten Schlußsatz.

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TRANSPARENCY 4

Die Goldwarenfabrik J. Hammer in Pforzheim (Postleitzahl 7530), Postfach 298, schickt eine Bestellung an die Tachibana Pearl Co. in Nagoya, Japan. Herr Haberle von J. Hammer bedankt sich für einen Brief vom 2. März und gibt eine neue Bestellung auf. Er möchte 40 Stück Perlen (Größe 4-4,5 mm, Preis pro Stück $ 4,-) und 100 Stück (Größe 5-5,5 mm, Preis pro Stück $ 5,-) bestellen. Herr Haberle betont, daß man keine anderen Größen benötigt. Geben Sie einen Grund dafür an. Er erinnert Tachibana daran, daß die Form der Bezahlung dieselbe bleibt. Sie können die Form nennen.[11]

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TRANSPARENCY 5

Folgende Nachricht der Firma Jansen Export GmbH in Hamburg an die Firma Metallwaren AG in Köln wird als Telefongespräch, Fernschreiben, Telegramm und Brief übermittelt:

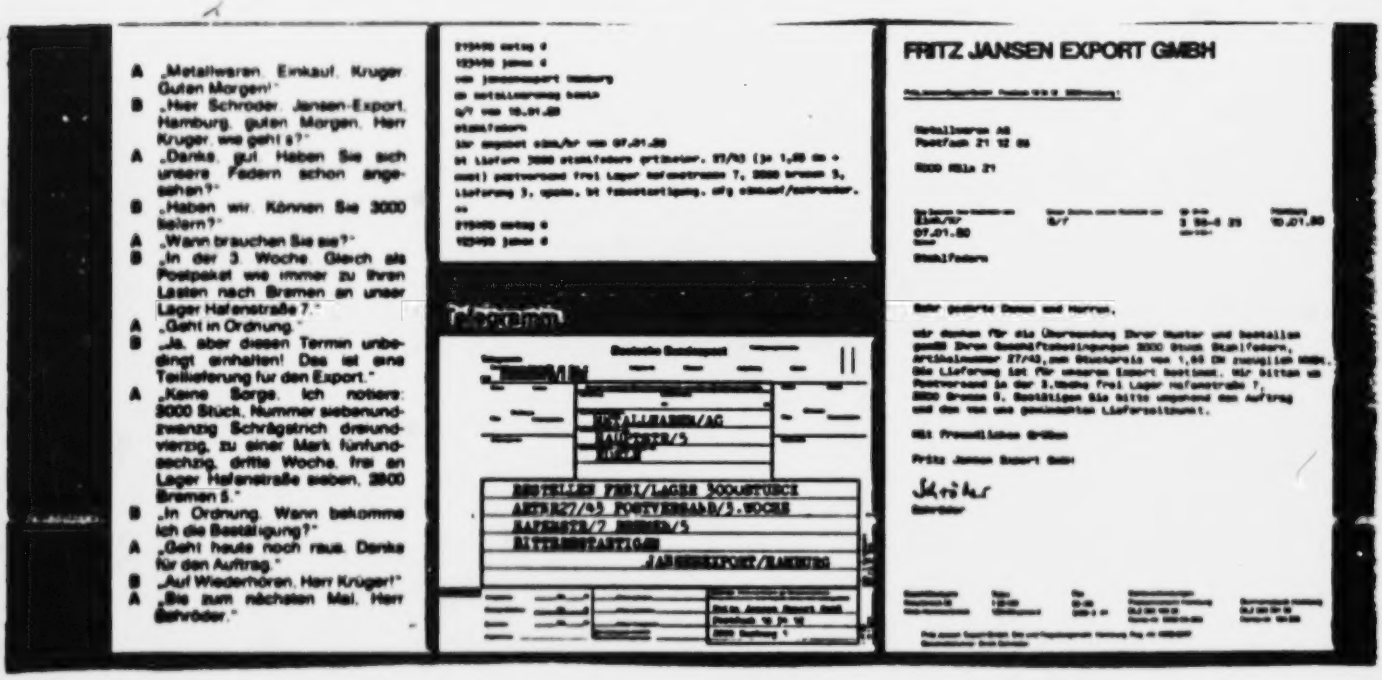
a. Bestellung von 3000 Stahlfedern Artikelnummer 27/43

b. Stückpreis DM 1,65 + MwSt.

c. Lieferung 3. Woche, Postversand frei Lager, Hafenstr. 7
   2800 Bremen

d. Auftragsbestätigung erbeten

Telefongespräch Fernschreiben Brief/Fernkopie


A „Metallwaren, Einkauf, Krüger. Guten Morgen!"
B „Hier Schröder, Jansen-Export, Hamburg, guten Morgen, Herr Krüger, wie geht's?"
A „Danke, gut. Haben Sie sich unsere Federn schon angesehen?"
B „Haben wir. Können Sie 3000 liefern?"
A „Wann brauchen Sie sie?"
B „In der 3. Woche. Gleich als Postpaket wie immer zu Ihren Lasten nach Bremen an unser Lager Hafenstraße 7."
A „Geht in Ordnung."
B „Ja, aber diesen Termin unbedingt einhalten! Das ist eine Teillieferung für den Export."
A „Keine Sorge. Ich notiere: 3000 Stück, Nummer siebenundzwanzig Schrägstrich dreiundvierzig, zu einer Mark fünfundsechzig, dritte Woche, frei an Lager Hafenstraße sieben, 2800 Bremen 5."
B „In Ordnung. Wann bekomme ich die Bestätigung?"
A „Geht heute noch raus. Danke für den Auftrag."
B „Auf Wiederhören, Herr Krüger!"
A „Bis zum nächsten Mal, Herr Schröder."
Fernkopie
FRITZ JANSEN EXPORT GMBH

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